

Manners, Motherhood, and the Role of Women
in The Awakening and The Good Mother

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Throughout our lives, most of us learn some type of manners-- certain expectations about our behavior in various situations. Manners may be as simple and clearly stated as those many of us were taught as children; keep your elbows off the table; say thank you; excuse yourself. However, when we look closer at the kinds of manners that affect our daily lives, we become aware of a pervasive influence that is less easily defined. For instance, why is it customary to dress male babies in blue, but not in pink? Why are household chores such as cooking and cleaning often thought of as "woman's work"? These behaviors result from societal expectations that, although perhaps not explicitly stated, are generally implied, and affect our lives in very personal ways. How we perceive our roles as men or women, our attitudes toward money and success, and the decisions we make about raising our children are all aspects of our lives that are influenced by social conventions. The set of manners, or social conventions, varies from one group to another, depending on factors such as age and socioeconomic status. This variation leads to conflict when an individual misunderstands or disregards the accepted social standards of behavior.

The importance of manners to the novel lies in how they affect the individual character. When the connection between

manners and character is strong enough to warrant further study of the relationship, then the work is considered a novel of manners (Tuttleton 10). It is not necessary that manners themselves be the central focus of the novel; in fact, this is often not the case. The Jane Austen novel, Pride and Prejudice is about marriage, but the conflicts in the story arise out of discrepancies in, and misunderstandings of manners. James Tuttleton, in The Novel of Manners in America, defines the novel of manners:

By a novel of manners I mean a novel in which the manners, social customs, folkways, conventions, traditions, and mores of a given social group at a given time and place play a dominant role in the lives of fictional characters, exert control over their behavior and thought, and constitute a determinant upon the actions in which they are engaged, and in which these manners and customs are detailed realistically--with, in fact, a premium upon the exactness of their representation. (10)

Tuttleton maintains that the novel of manners is "sociologically oriented," and follows up this idea with a system of analyzing society through five "areas of social experience" (11). The first and broadest category involves a "set of social conventions and taboos regarding relations between the sexes, between parents

and children, as well as people's behavior in the company of their fellowmen." The second category deals with accepted ethical standards, and the third looks at religious and philosophical beliefs on one's role in the universe. Group four is concerned with economic organization and the importance of material wealth, and the last category examines the political structure of the community (Tuttleton 11-12). All five categories may or may not affect a single novel of manners, but breaking down the social experience into five aspects helps to identify manners more specifically.

As it exposes the manners of a society in a specific setting, the novel of manners provides a type of social history that exemplifies the values of the time and place. Taken one step further, this aspect of the novel of manners--with its emphasis on realistic detail--allows for a comparative look at the development of manners surrounding certain issues over a period of time. Two novels, separated by nearly a century, illustrate this point: The Awakening, written by Kate Chopin in 1899, and The Good Mother by Sue Miller in 1986. In both novels, social values concerning a woman's expected role in society as it relates to the issues of motherhood, sexuality, and independence are brought out by a woman's awakening to her own potential. The impact of manners becomes starkly apparent as we see the consequences for two women who move beyond the accepted social conventions. Even more interesting are the

similarities of manners surrounding the role of women in each novel, despite almost one-hundred years of change.

The titles--The Awakening and The Good Mother--each have significance in both novels. The main character in each novel is a woman who experiences an awakening that forces her to question society's definition of her role as a woman. As each woman redefines her own life, she also disregards many social conventions. This questioning and the consequent denial of societal expectations creates the conflict between manners and the individual that is necessary to the novel of manners. In The Awakening and The Good Mother, the central characters' expected roles as women are directly tied to the fact that they are mothers. Ultimately, their need for independence and their growing sexuality lead to a conflict between their needs as women and their roles as mothers.

Edna Pontellier, the main character of Kate Chopin's novel The Awakening, is twenty-eight years old and seems comfortably married with two children living in New Orleans. Her husband is a Creole, meaning Roman Catholic, and when the novel opens, Edna and her family are spending the summer by the sea at Grand Isle "in the society of Creoles" (Chopin 12). The Creole society itself implies a set of manners with which Edna, who comes from "sound old Presbyterian Kentucky stock," is not completely at ease (87). She is constantly surprised by "their

entire absence of prudery" and "their freedom of expression" (12). Earlier in the summer, Edna was shocked to hear her friend Madame Ratignolle tell one of the men all the details of her most recent childbirth. Manners concerning the relationship between the sexes seem contradictory in several instances. A Creole woman upholds a "lofty chastity," yet it is perfectly acceptable for a young single man named Robert to devote himself to Edna for the summer. On the surface, this devotion is harmless because it is supposed to be understood that this flirtation is not to be taken seriously; therefore, "the Creole husband is never jealous" (14). Madame Ratignolle makes this assumption clear in her conversation with Robert: "If your attentions to any married women here were ever offered with any intention of being convincing, you would not be the gentleman we all know you to be..." (26). The reputation of a lady and a gentleman rest on this understanding; however, the preservation of manners on the surface does not protect underlying emotions. This situation proves to be a precarious one for a young woman unaccustomed to the "rules" and who is becoming dissatisfied within the confines of her marriage.

Almost one-hundred years later, Anna Dunlap, the main character in Sue Miller's novel, The Good Mother, has also realized that she is not happily married. Like Edna Pontellier, Anna is nearly thirty years old and a mother. Unlike Edna, Anna lives in Massachusettes during a time when divorce is common;

this option was not available to Edna. As the novel begins, Anna's divorce is almost settled. She sees the divorce as a way to free herself from ties to her family as well as her husband. All of her life, Anna has functioned within a set of manners established by her mother's family. Whereas Edna was shocked by the Creole's "lack of prudery," Anna's family was very closed on the subject of sexuality. As a child she was surrounded by love, "but love conditional on so much: on being good: on doing well: on making the family proud" (97). One of the early "demands" as she referred to her family's expectations, included Anna's success as a pianist. When she realized that she "just wasn't that good," it was as if she had failed to meet her family's expectations, and she began to pull away from them (187). "As a group, my mother's family held a kind of invisible standard up to all its members' lives and ambitions. All the family bonds translated, finally, into appraisal, a push for achievement" (55). Anna's marriage to Brian provided some relief from her family's demands, and with the divorce--another disappointment to her family--she felt she had finally escaped them.

The idea of an escape from a restrictive set of manners is important to both novels as a step toward fulfillment of the emotional need for independence. Anna's awakening began with the idea of a divorce, and grew while the necessary details

were worked out. Piece by piece, Anna redefined her role in society. She was now a divorcée, living in her own apartment, with custody of her daughter Molly. More importantly, with the exception of a minimal divorce settlement to care for her child, Anna had achieved financial independence. As a piano teacher with a flexible university laboratory job, she is able to support herself. For Anna, this escape to independence is comparatively easy. She can legally divorce her husband without scandal, and she has the means to provide for herself. In Edna's situation the achievement of independence is more difficult for several reasons. First of all, because of the wealth and status of Edna's husband, she has many social obligations to which Anna is not subjected. Secondly, Edna must also consider her children and have some means of financial support. Finally, she cannot divorce her husband. Edna overcomes each of these obstacles, and her pointed disregard for established manners concerns those people who are close to her.

Upon her return to the city at the end of the summer at Grand Isle, Edna begins to consciously ignore many of her social and household obligations. Much to the chagrin of her husband, Edna chooses to be out on a Tuesday, her usual reception day, without a good excuse. Mr. Pontellier tells Edna that by now she should understand "That people don't do such things; we've got to observe les convenances if we ever expect to get on and

keep up with the procession" (67). "Keeping up with the procession" is no longer of any importance to Edna, who responds by completely giving up her receiving days, as well as the running of the household. Edna's husband is aware of society's expectations of a woman, especially one of their own social circle, and he is shocked by her "absolute disregard for her duties as a wife..." (75). Part of this disregard for her "duties" is the result of Edna spending more time at her painting. According to her husband, it is "the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (75). Mr. Pontellier presents an accurate summary of Edna's expected role as a woman. Edna's move toward independence seems nearly complete when her children are removed to their grandmother for several weeks. She has already given up any obligation she felt to her husband, who is conveniently away from home on business. All that remains is for her to move out of their large house and into a smaller one of her own, taking only those household articles that actually belong to her. Edna's goal is financial independence, made possible by a small income of her own, enhanced by the sale of some of her paintings. Always conscious of appearances, Mr. Pontellier explains this awkward social situation by arranging for the remodeling of his home, which would necessitate the absence of the family.

At this point, Anna and Edna have both achieved a high degree of independence. But because they are mothers they are subject to society's restrictions in ways they might not be if they did not have children. To Anna, her daughter Molly is the most significant part of her life, and as a mother, Anna is willing to give anything of herself for her child. Anna's new independence requires her to work about forty hours per week, during which time Molly goes to a daycare center. It is typical for a father to spend this much time away from his child, and this was always the case with Anna's ex-husband Brian. However, there seems to be a stigma attached to working mothers, and the assumption is that the child will suffer in her mother's absence. Anna's grandfather represents this view, and also implies that she is self-indulgent in her need for independence, at the expense of her daughter's happiness. He tells Anna that "there is no reason why [Molly] should suffer because of the decisions you've made about your life" (119). When Anna rejects her grandfather's offer of financial assistance, she is also rejecting the societal views that he represents, in favor of her own judgement about what is best for her child.

Edna and Anna differ greatly in their respective attachments to their children. Edna is fond of her children, and has strong bursts of affection for them, but she does not miss them when they are away from her. She visits them at their grandmother's home

in the country and "wept for very pleasure when she felt their little arms clasping her," and left them "with a wrench and a pang" (125). "All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul" (126). In short, Edna is not a "mother-woman." Chopin describes the mother-women as "women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals..." (10). Edna does not idolize her children or worship her husband by any means, but it is the last part of the description that marks the real difference between Edna and her friend Madame Ratignolle, who Chopin provides as a model of society's ideal of the woman's role as a mother. The antithesis to the mother-woman is Mademoiselle Reisz, a pianist who is completely devoted to her music. She is considered odd and disliked by many people, but she and Edna are friends. Edna compares herself to both of these roles, and admires both women, but she can adopt neither of their lives for her own. She has not committed herself to her children or to her art, but only to her own independence. As a result, her husband criticized her for neglecting her family, just as in The Good Mother Anna, who is admittedly committed to her child, was accused of causing her child to "suffer" for her decisions.

In both novels, as Edna and Anna found the independence they

required, each woman also experienced an awakening to her own sexuality. In Edna's case, the physical aspect of this awakening amounts to a brief affair with a reputed "ladies' man," although her heart is with Robert in Mexico. The impact of Edna's sexual experience on her family is minimal until the conclusion of the novel, and even then the extent of her relationships may not have been known to them. Edna's friend, Madame Ratignolle, expressed her concern for Edna's relationship with Arobin because his "attentions alone are enough to ruin a woman's name" (127). The interest here is not in Edna's heart, but in her reputation, which her blatant disregard for social propriety has endangered. Madame Ratignolle also advises Anna against living alone because the world is "evil-minded." When Robert returns from Mexico, Edna's assertiveness leads them to confess their love for each other, although somewhat reluctantly on his part. He told Edna that he has been fighting his love for her because she is not "free." As far as he is concerned, she is Leonce Pontellier's wife. In Edna's mind she had already freed herself from any obligation to her husband, and she told Robert that "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (143). After more words of love, Edna left to attend a friend, with the promise from Robert that he would wait for her. She returned only to find a note saying "I love you. Good-by--because I love you" (148). Edna thought she had escaped

society's restraints, but was forced to confront them in the form of Robert, who was unable to free himself as she had done.

The effect of this experience on Edna's motherhood is drastic, but questionable. As she leaves Madame Ratignolle's birth scene to return to Robert, her friend begged her to "think of the children" (146). She does think of them on her way home and confesses that she needed her independence, but would not want to "trample upon the little lives" in order to have her own way (147). She has realized after Robert left that "To-day it is Arobin, to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Leonce Pontellier--but Raoul and Etienne!" (151). The children seem to be a consideration of responsibility for Edna, because she describes them as "antagonists who had overcome her...and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (151). Edna is willing to give up the "unessential" for her children, but she could not sacrifice herself. She could go on having lovers but will not subject her children to the scandal. However, neither will she give up her soul to be society's version of a dutiful wife and mother. Ultimately, the "unessential" that Edna gives up is her life.

Anna Dunlap's sexual awakening almost one-hundred years later is described much more explicitly. As a divorced woman, it is not unusual that she should have a lover, and Anna does so openly. Society's concern in this relationship is the acceptability of Anna, as a mother, having a lover. However, Anna's independence and her reliance on her own decisions concerning Molly, bring Leo and Molly together in a relationship that to Anna is ideal. Anna's

passion for Leo leads them into a great deal of sexual freedom around Molly. In one critical instance, Molly's own curiosity provokes an incident of sexual contact that in Anna's eyes may have seemed innocent; however, Anna's ex-husband interprets it as an example of sexual misconduct and begins a custody battle. Had this incident occurred within a family setting and involved Molly's father, society may have been understanding, but manners surrounding sexual conduct as it relates to children are explosive. Suddenly Anna, like Edna, is forced to confront the manners she had tried so hard to escape. Not only does she have to confront society's expectations, she has to wage a battle for her daughter on the terms which she has rejected. Society can even resort to legal means to preserve manners. Essentially, society is in a position to judge who would be a better parent. Brian has a wife and a successful career; Anna is a piano teacher and has a live-in lover without a "steady" job. Brian and his wife are very conservative regarding sexual issues and Molly; Anna feels it is better to be open about sex. Through the custody battle, society's preference for certain characteristics of a good mother become apparent. Finally, Anna loses custody of Molly to her ex-husband.

The relationship between manners and morals is not the same for every novel of manners. In a Jane Austen novel, for example, manners and morals have a positive correlation; if a character has good manners, she is probably a good person. In the The Awakening and The Good Mother, the relationship is a little

more complex. In both novels, manners are very important for appearances, and a disregard for these manners can be fatal. However, good manners do not necessarily indicate good moral character, any more than a lack of attention to manners proves a bad moral character. In The Awakening, Mr. Pontellier is extremely concerned about manners, but expresses little concern for his wife. In The Good Mother, Leo had a strong affection for Molly, but when he went beyond the accepted boundaries of behavior, his affection for her did not matter to society.

Gary Lindberg points out that typically the relationship between individual character and social convention turns out to be "more serious, difficult, dense, and demanding than the central characters had expected" (4). This is exactly the case for both Anna and Edna. Each character thought she was escaping the constraints of social conventions as she moved toward her own fulfillment as a human being and as a woman; however, unless one chooses to live a solitary life, manners still affect us through the people we care about. As each woman disregards manners in her life, she is forced to face the consequences of that action; in these novels it meant death and the loss of a child.

Even with the intervention of nearly a century of social change, manners surrounding the issues of independence and sexuality as they effect women, particularly mothers, have changed very little. Even if women such as Edna Pontellier and Anna Dunlap are willing to move beyond accepted social standards

to fulfill their own potential, they seem to be unable to escape the judgement of societal demands. In The Awakening, an artist friend of Edna's tells her that "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (110). Edna and Anna, representative of two different times, did soar beyond the plain of tradition; but in the end they were brought down by commitments to people and a society unable to soar with them.

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